

# THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO



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## NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Councilmember Atkins Opposes Transit Rate Increase**

The following opinion piece appeared in the Tuesday, June 10th, issue of the San Diego Union-Tribune.

#### **DON'T DRIVE PEOPLE FROM PUBLIC TRANSIT**

by Councilmember Toni Atkins

The Metropolitan Transit Development Board is the local agency responsible for developing and implementing San Diego's public transportation network. From the fares paid, to the routes available, every person using our bus or trolley system is directly affected by decisions made at MTDB.

Today, we approach an exciting crossroad. Critical but difficult choices about how our future transportation system will operate and be funded need to be made.

As to future planning, We are on the right track. Presently, MTDB has begun to implement its Transit First Showcase bus rapid transit project designed to reduce travel times and get riders to their destinations faster. This can only come as a welcome relief to all transit users. Our first effort will provide faster service for commuters in my council district. Designed to utilize the El Cajon and Park Boulevard corridors through mid-city, it is envisioned that the current 45-minute trip from SDSU to downtown could be reduced by up to 30 percent.

Troubling, however, is the direction that MTDB is moving in order to address its current budget deficit. Like every other local government agency, the recent downturn in the economy has resulted in reduced revenues. TransNet, the one-half-cent transportation sales tax approved by voters in 1987, has fallen; the state has withdrawn significant contributions to transportation projects; and ridership has declined as unemployment has increased, further eroding revenues. All of these factors have combined to create an economic crisis at our transit agency.

In an attempt to deal with its revenue shortfall, MTDB has directed its staff to implement service cuts of about \$4 million over the next four years and has recently adopted fare increases. While Mayor Dick Murphy and I argued successfully to reduce the proposal to only \$1 million in service cuts in the coming year, the board's direction still includes an additional \$1 million of service cuts in each of the

succeeding three years. Four years from now, we will be providing \$4 million less a year in service to our communities.

A similar decision was made about fare increases. Currently, the board proposes to increase them this year and each of the next three years. These fare increases and these service cuts, cumulatively, will seriously impact those persons for whom use of our bus and trolley system is a necessity rather than an option. This is their only means of transportation, and it is safe to say the impacts will be felt mostly by families at the lower end of the economic spectrum with less disposable income.

A solution can be found. Currently, TransNet funding for our transit system is split 80/20 between capital projects and operations. Increasing the amount of funding utilized for operations to 30 percent should help provide fare and service stabilization.

Capital projects are important but become useless if users are forced off the bus because fares are too high or service is not responsive to commuter needs. Support for this proposal includes the League of Women Voters and many members of the public who have testified before and submitted comments to MTDB.

While tough budget choices must be made, the MTDB must not balance the budget of our public transportation system on the backs of those who can least afford it. What we need to do is to make our public transportation system a more attractive choice for the commuter, not more difficult and expensive to access.

This is what the Transit First Showcase project seeks to do. It's a great vision for the future, but we can't ignore the present. We have available to us in our TransNet reserves the funds that would allow us to lessen these fare increases and service cuts and continue to support our current ridership.

Sometime in the next four years, San Diego County will be faced with the reauthorization of TransNet. We need to build faith in our transit system and in our ability to deliver transportation. We need to build that trust with our citizens if we are going to be successful in continuing or expanding TransNet when we go to the ballot box.

There are those who argue we should run the transit system more like a business: "If it can't pay its own way, too bad." I disagree. Nowhere in this country does public transit support itself without taxpayer subsidies. It is a vital public service, and one that very much deserves public support.

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Atkins represents the 3rd District on the San Diego City Council which includes much of the mid-city area. She is one of four city representatives on the 15-member Metropolitan Transit Development Board.

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